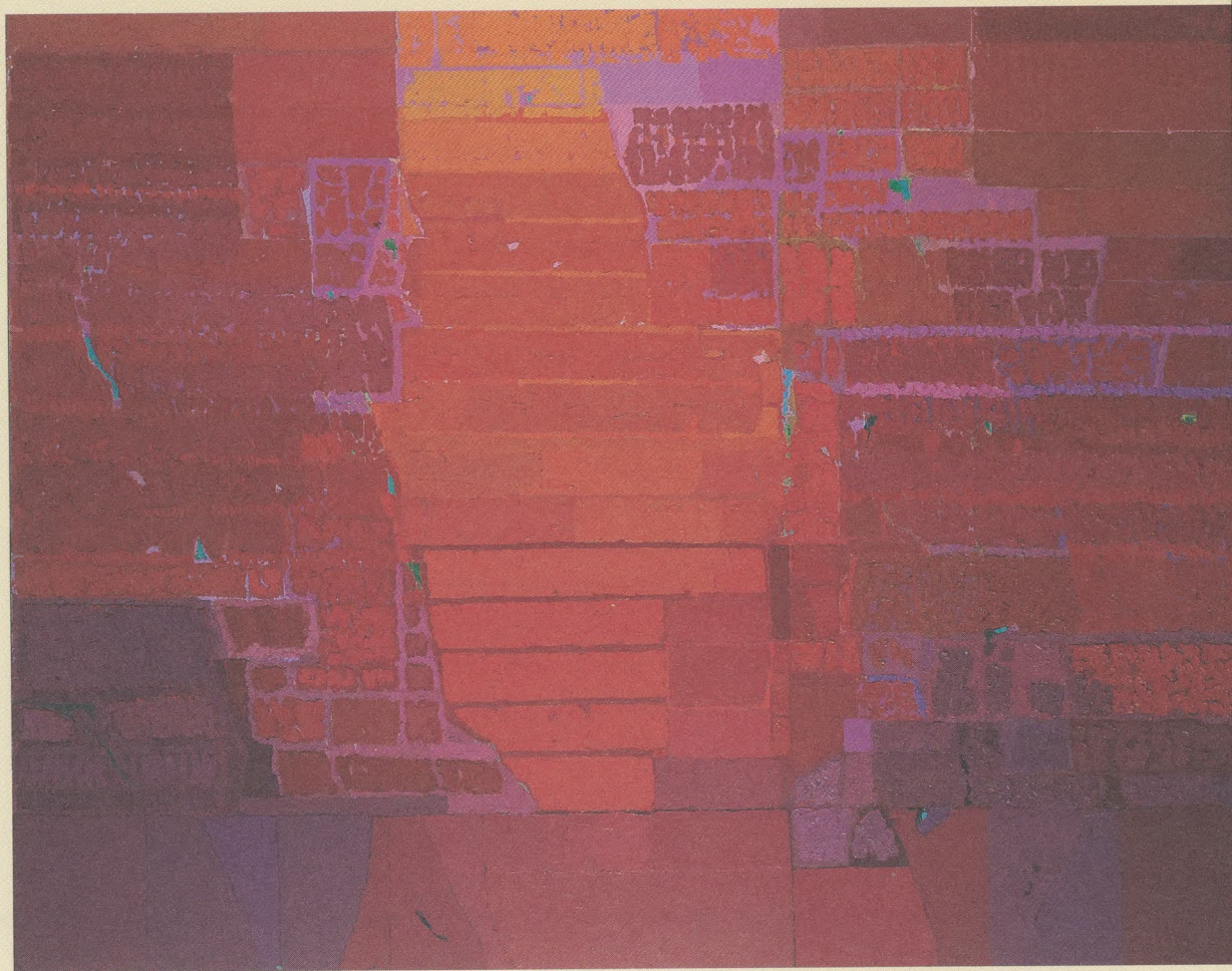


cynthia **LITTLEFIELD**



jack **COWART** *Deputy Director/Chief Curator*

For over 40 years a cluster of artists intrigued by color and light have been working in and around Washington. Notable artists from our region have included Edward Corbett, Gene Davis, Tom Downing, Felrath Hines, Jacob Kainen, Morris Louis, Howard Mehring, Paul Reed, Alma Thomas, Anne Truitt, and Cynthia Littlefield, among so many others. In their highly personal blends of expressionism and abstraction, these artists demonstrate a profound sensibility to chromatic and painterly materials.

This focused celebration of Cynthia Littlefield's evocative landscapes seems a proper beginning for a new exhibition program recently endowed by Evelyn Stefansson Nef. The Nef fund supports the Corcoran's investigation and display of work by mature artists whose achievements have not received adequate recognition at the museum level.

All of us at the Corcoran are grateful to Cynthia Littlefield for her enthusiasm and patience through this inaugural process. I thank my former assistant, Johanna Halford-MacLeod, for introducing me to Ms. Littlefield several years ago. Memories of that revelatory meeting and subsequent studio visits with Ms. Littlefield have provided me with continued aesthetic pleasure. I also thank Paige Turner, assistant curator of exhibitions, for her caring and insightful organization of this first Nef fund exhibition. The Board of Trustees and the staff of the Corcoran Museum and School of Art take great pleasure in recognizing the inspired patronage of Evelyn Nef. We are delighted with her support of these exhibitions, and welcome the profound and permanent enhancements such an association bestows upon our public programming and curatorial capability.

"THE GRID FORCES ME TO GIVE EQUAL TIME TO ALL PARTS OF THE TERRAIN." LITTLEFIELD



Light of the Southwest, Desert #1, 1993, pencil on paper; Collection of the artist

Functioning like a net to capture lost sensation, the gridded structure of Cynthia Littlefield's paintings invests the pristine virtues of color with material as well as metaphysical significance. Evoking the compressed, dimension-less space of memory, these abstract landscapes are charged with confrontation. Like flashes of recognition, Littlefield's high-keyed blocks of networked color are first established and then undone in the artist's re-creation of place out of the tangle of memory.

In the late 1970s, Littlefield abandoned the dark, umber tones of her work from the *Night Sea* series and began using a rich, vibrant palette to develop atmospheric idioms for place. For nearly two decades she has used her psychologically charged paintings to retrieve the buried sensations of her childhood in the American Southwest. Entitled *Light of the Southwest*, the series consists of works that can be divided into three thematic groups—*Desert*, *Acequia Madre*, and *Canyon*. Littlefield's handling of surface—from the thinly painted veils of color in the early *Desert* paintings to the thick, geometric spaces in the most recent *Canyon* paintings—

underscores the evolution of her ideas about how to concretize her remembered landscape.

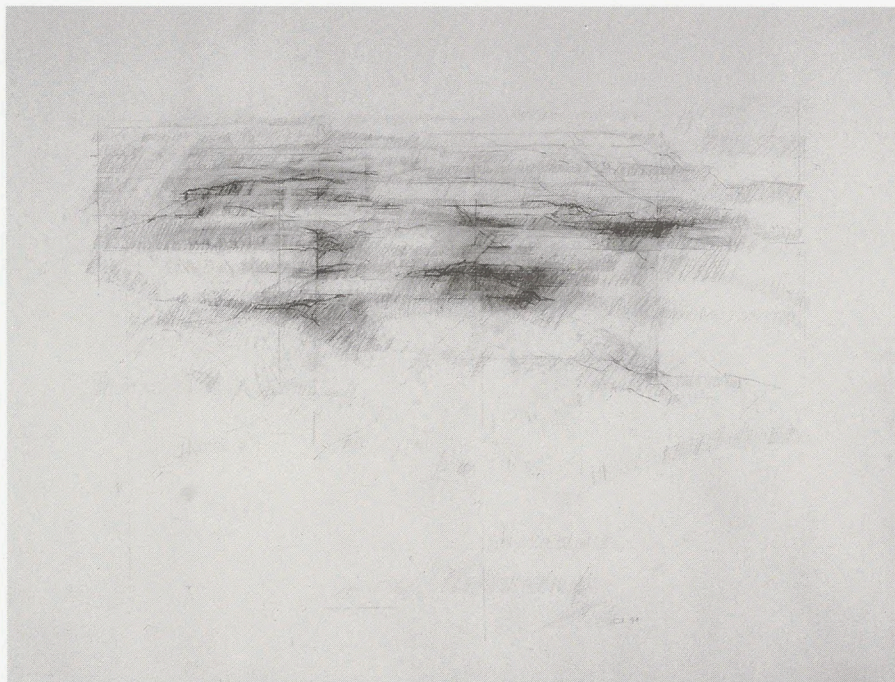
Equating the process of recollection in drawing with blindness, philosopher Jacques Derrida imagines a hand that “caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight.”¹ Similar to Derrida's blind draftsman, Littlefield feels her way through the ruins of remembered space. Her canvases have irregularities of surface that, like the hand-worked coats of clay and sand in Native American adobe structures, slowly divulge the details of their seamless, steady construction.

The earliest works from the *Southwest* series, a group of ten moderately scaled abstract paintings entitled *Desert*, consist of simple bands of color distributed evenly across the surface. Like Josef Albers, Littlefield employs a severely restricted palette, but her consistently hot colors elicit strongly sensual nuances and dramatic tensions. These brightly colored fields of pigment serve as Littlefield's primary means of evoking the ephemeral light, shimmering heat, and open vistas inherent to her subject. As the artist

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #1, 1995, oil on canvas; Collection of Bill and Wendy Jackson



Light of the Southwest, Desert #2, 1993, pencil on paper; Collection of Arthur B. Kennickell



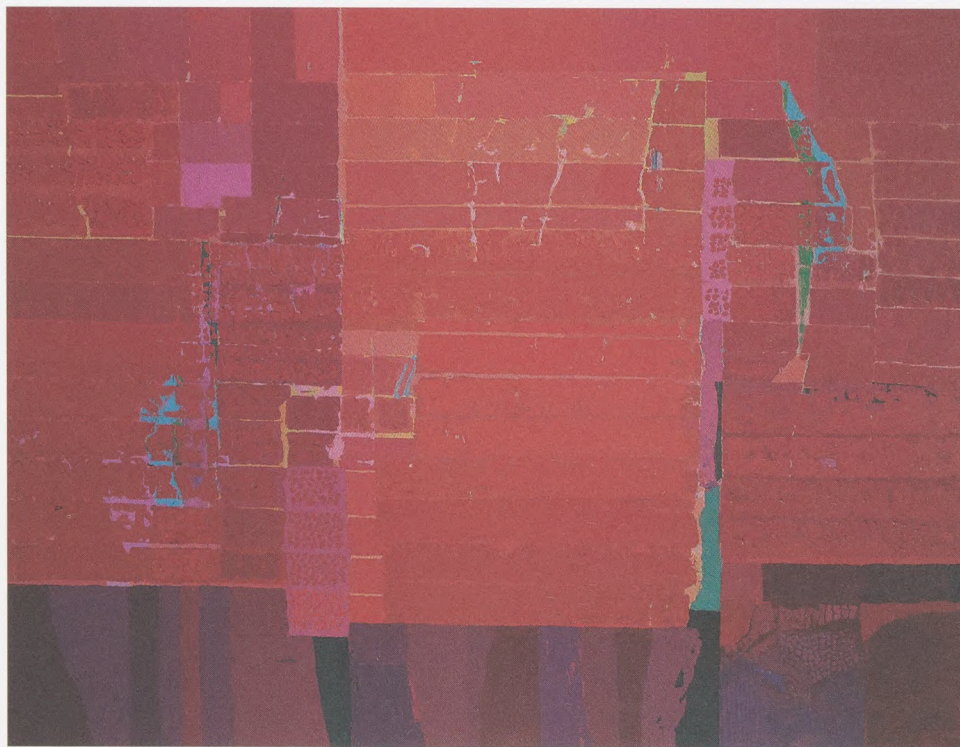
explains, "My palette comes from my retrieval of sensations."

In these early paintings, the focus is on the most telling aspect of any landscape—the horizon line. Collapsing proximate and distant space, Littlefield uses an all-over approach that mirrors her understanding of the impossibility of any kind of comprehensive perception in the wide-open spaces of the desert. Much as the eye strains to take in the margins of a panoramic view, Littlefield's democratic compositions allocate activity to the edges as well as the center of the canvas. Bounded bands of paint stretch evenly and deliberately across the surface, declaring themselves, through the intensity of vibrant red, purple, and orange, with the descriptive urgency of a dream or a hallucination.

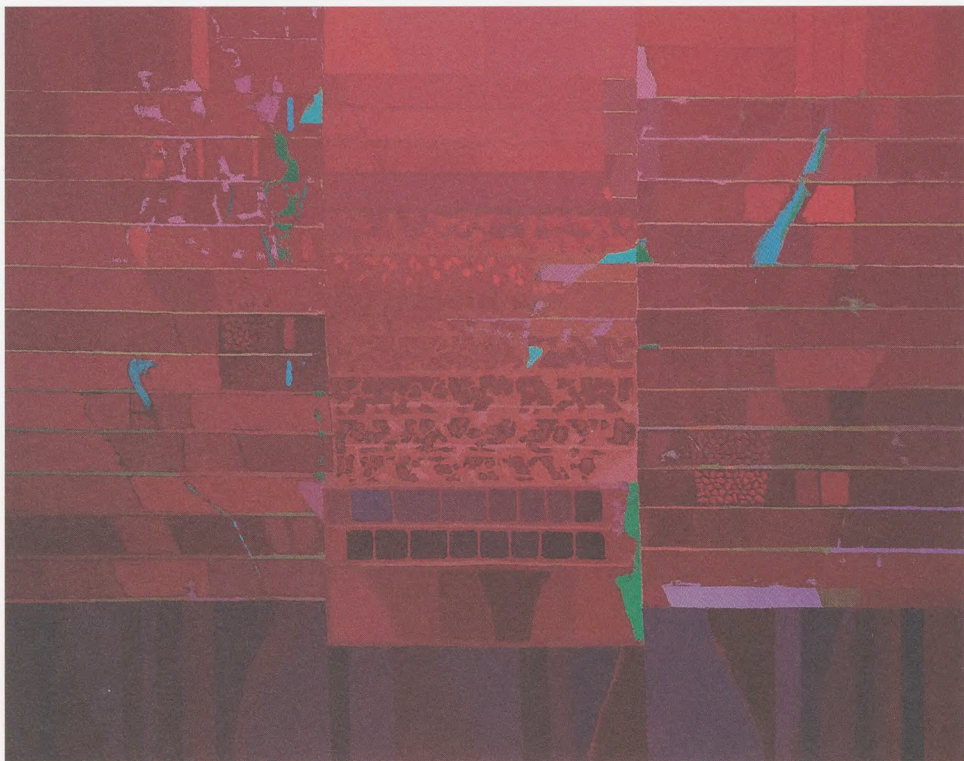
Littlefield's process of generating a space capable of articulating her memories is clearly demonstrated in drawings from the *Desert* series. Here, a grid of attenuated lines is ruptured with areas of dark and light shading. Like Derrida's blind men who draw "in a way that is at once

cautious and bold," Littlefield uses her grid to apprehend the imperceptible.² As she explains, "the grid forces me to give equal time to all parts of the terrain." Filling in the initial structure, she emphasizes some of these "lay-lines" and erases others. With smudged lines and fragmented edges, her linear patterns articulate the interlocking nature of all the parts of the landscape. The drawings contain the germ of the structure of the larger painted canvases, where submerged lines anchor and scaffold the layers of color.

Littlefield's latest work displays a particularly American confidence in the self-constructed universe. This spirit is similar to the work of Richard Diebenkorn, whose 1951 *Albuquerque* series reflects his interest in abstracting the New Mexico landscape. In Diebenkorn's aerial-view interpretations of the New Mexico desert, landscape is simultaneously interpretive and bound by observation. Littlefield acknowledges that Diebenkorn's work "gave me the courage to work from sensation without any constant architectural structure."



Light of the Southwest, Canyon #7, 1998, oil on canvas; Collection of the artist



Light of the Southwest, Canyon #8, 1998, oil on canvas; Collection of the artist

In the nine *Canyon* paintings included in this exhibition, Littlefield is more concerned with building up surfaces than anchoring a distant horizon line. The grooves of color in these canvases are thick, irregular sequences that mirror the lapses and shifts in the certainty of Littlefield's memory. In *Canyon #1* (1995) and *Canyon #2* (1995) she animates bands of paint by interrupting wide washes of color with areas of impastoed pigment. The patchwork construction that emerges in these first *Canyon* paintings illustrates Littlefield's departure from the reductive structure of the *Desert* paintings. The colors in these works are alternately reserved and warm, recalling the palette used by Helen Frankenthaler in her early stained canvases. In *Canyon #3* (1995) and *Canyon #4* (1997), these transparent pinks and reds are built into thicker, craggier surfaces which more openly reveal the heavy underpainting.

These juxtapositions of density and hue, opacity and translucence, are even more pronounced in *Canyon #5* (1997). The triptych construction that emerges out of the areas of tonal variation refers to the compression of space in a canyon;

for Littlefield, these contrasting relationships in the canvas echo the shifting rhythms of recalled sensation.

In the four final works in the *Canyon* series, the underlying grid structure peeks through a confusion of brick-like blocks of color and resembles striations in rock. These densely constructed paintings are exercises in packing: like an excavation project in reverse, the artist smothers the grid, burying it beneath thick, deliberative areas of color. Despite her interest in building up and breaking down the initial geometries of the canvas, Littlefield claims that, "I become so enchanted with the underpainting, I hate to lose it." Like the uncertainty of distant memory, some traces of Littlefield's original armature remain visible through her encrusted surfaces. These embedded fragments are artifacts reiterating the elusive character of landscape and memory.

PAIGE TURNER, *Assistant Curator of Exhibitions*

¹Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.

²Ibid., p. 5.

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #5, 1997, oil on canvas; Private Collection



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

height precedes width, measurements are provided in inches

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #1, 1995

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of Bill and Wendy Jackson

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #2, 1995

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of Mrs. Stephen B. Lemann

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #3, 1995

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of Caroline McCauley

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #4, 1997

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of Elaine Decker Rosensweig

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #5, 1997

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Private Collection

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #6, 1998

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #7, 1998

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #8, 1998

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Canyon #9, 1998

oil on canvas

58 x 72"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Desert, 1998

oil on canvas

36 x 54"

Collection of Mark Flynn

Light of the Southwest, Desert #1, 1993

pencil on paper

23 x 30.5"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Desert #2, 1993

pencil on paper

23 x 30.5"

Collection of Arthur B. Kennickell

Light of the Southwest, Desert #3, 1993, pencil on paper; Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, Desert #3, 1993

pencil on paper

23 x 30.5"

Collection of the artist

Light of the Southwest, 1993

oil on masonite panel

7 x 10.5"

Collection of Joseph Holbach

Light of the Southwest, Canyon, 1995

oil on masonite panel

9 x 11"

Collection of Arthur B. Kennickell

Light of the Southwest, Acequia Madre, 1995

oil on masonite panel

8 x 12"

Collection of Joseph Holbach

Light of the Southwest, Acequia Madre, 1997

oil on masonite panel

9 x 11"

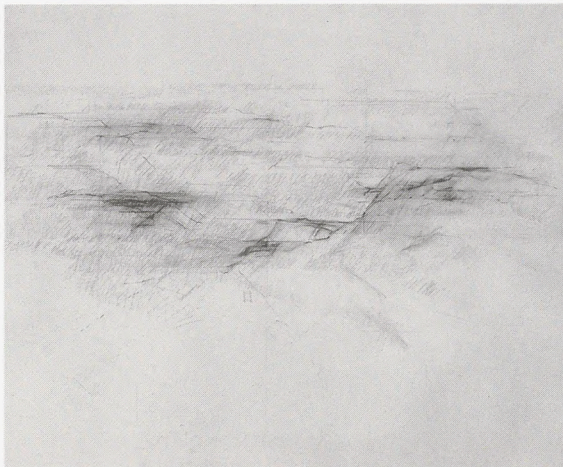
Private Collection

Light of the Southwest, Acequia Madre, 1998

oil on masonite panel

9 x 11"

Collection of the artist



LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Mark Flynn

Private Collection

Joseph Holbach

Bill and Wendy Jackson

Arthur B. Kennickell

Mrs. Stephen B. Lemann

Caroline McCauley

Elaine Decker Rosensweig

Private Collection

Born in 1929 in Arizona, Cynthia Littlefield studied painting at the University of Texas in Austin before moving to Washington in the early 1950s. She has been an active participant in the local arts community, both as an artist and teacher, and has exhibited widely throughout the area. This exhibition of recent work is Littlefield's first solo exhibition in a major museum.

EDUCATION

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1980 | MFA, American University, Washington DC |
| 1950 | BFA, University of Texas, Austin |

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

bold face denotes solo exhibitions

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 1998 | Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC |
| 1988 | "Collector's Choice," Collector's Gallery, Washington, DC |
| 1985-88 | Cora Dobson, Alexandria, Virginia |
| 1984 | "Artists' Call," Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC |
| 1982-83 | Fort Worth Gallery, Texas |
| | Marianne Deson Gallery, Chicago |
| 1980-84 | American Institute of Architects, Washington, DC |
| 1981 | Barbara Fielder Gallery, Washington, DC |
| 1980 | Watkins Gallery, The American University, Washington, DC |
| 1979-80 | Barbara Fielder Gallery, Washington, DC |
| 1979 | Georgetown Art Gallery, Washington, DC |
| 1978 | The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC |
| 1977 | Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, DC |
| 1976-77 | The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC |
| 1971 | Watkins Gallery, The American University |
| 1970 | Potter's House Gallery, Washington, DC |
| 1969 | Emerson Gallery, McLean, Virginia |
| 1964 | "Capital Area Show," National Museum of Fine Arts,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC |

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Cynthia Littlefield

August 14–October 27, 1998

Organized by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and serves as the catalogue for the exhibition.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art

500 Seventeenth Street NW

Washington, DC 20006-4804

Curator: Paige Turner, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions

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The Nef fund exhibitions highlight the work of mature artists whose life's work and ongoing achievements merit greater recognition and special attention in exhibition.

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Cover: *Light of the Southwest, Canyon #6*, 1998, oil on canvas; Collection of the artist

